

criticise the acknowledged possessions hold by the rest of the Church. Their rivalry to Bishops and priests made them very willing to find any stone to fling at the secular clergy. There can, moreover, be little doubt that the orders still contained many enthusiasts who sincerely believed in the doctrine of evangelical poverty and who considered, like Wycliffe, that the Church had been poisoned by her wealth.<sup>1</sup>

In the early seventies, Wycliffe's main contention was for partial or complete disendowment of the English Church. His doctrinal heresies, his attack on the Papal power, had not then been developed. At his extraordinary trial at St Paul's, when John of Gaunt and Percy appeared in court to support him, the presence of a representative from each of the four mendicant orders was scarcely less remarkable. They came to defend the ground which they held in common with the accused, the doctrine of evangelical poverty and its application in the disendowment of the 'possessionate' clergy. It was the peculiar doctrine of the friars, exploited and brought into practical politics by Wycliffe. Probably no one expected, perhaps not even the reformer himself, that the Church would be deprived of all her possessions and reduced to rely altogether on alms and voluntary donation. It was characteristic of those times for partisans to ask far more than they expected to get; to lay claim, on the ground of some theory, to infinite space when a nutshell was the real end in view. But undoubtedly some very considerable confiscation of ecclesiastical wealth was hourly looked for in 1377, and the doctrine of evangelical poverty was the theoretic basis for the proposal.

Three years later the face of things had undergone a considerable change. John of Gaunt's supremacy was over, the attack on the property and privileges of the English Church had proved a fiasco. The weak and half-hearted character of the forces of attack, and the strength of the forces of resistance, had been made so apparent by the skirmish over the question of Sanctuary, that politicians altogether shrank from the larger question of disendowment. The position of Wycliffe

<sup>1</sup> See Ap.